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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV KDEM KPAO AJ

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR AZERBAIJAN-SPECIFIC STATEMENT FOR PRESS
FREEDOM COMMEMORATION DAY

REF: A) BAKU 519
B) STATE 55366

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¶11. (U) This is an action request; see paras 2 and 3.

¶12. (SBU) Over the last year, media freedom in Azerbaijan has deteriorated significantly, with physical attacks on several journalists, numerous criminal libel cases launched against independent and opposition journalists, government pressure - including the suspension of broadcasts - against the leading independent television and radio station ANS (which was awarded a six-year broadcast license on April 27, ref a), and the forced eviction of several independent and opposition news agencies from their offices. In order to maximize attention to this vitally important issue (ref b), the Ambassador will host a major reception on May 3 for journalists, civil society, government officials and diplomatic colleagues, where she will deliver an address on media freedom. We request that the Secretary or the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor issue an Azerbaijan-specific statement on media freedoms that the Ambassador could read aloud at our May 3 press freedom commemoration, to underscore the importance of media freedom to Azerbaijan's democratic development.

¶13. (U) Suggested text for Azerbaijan-specific statement follows:

There is no more important pillar of democracy than a free and active press. As a strong friend and partner of Azerbaijan, the United States wants to work with Azerbaijan to help it achieve its goal of developing as a strong, secular democracy. We welcome the recent decision to issue a broadcast license to ANS Television. We remain concerned, however, about the general state of media freedom in Azerbaijan. The unsolved murder of Elmar Huseynov and unpunished attacks against journalists have created a climate of intimidation. Criminal libel suits threaten to silence independent and critical voices. We urge the government to apprehend and prosecute those who attack journalists, and to decriminalize libel. We urge the media to raise professional and ethical journalistic standards. The United States is prepared to help. In the meantime, on the occasion of international Press Freedom Day, I salute and honor the courageous Azerbaijani journalists who continue to report the news.
Keep up the good work.

DERSE